



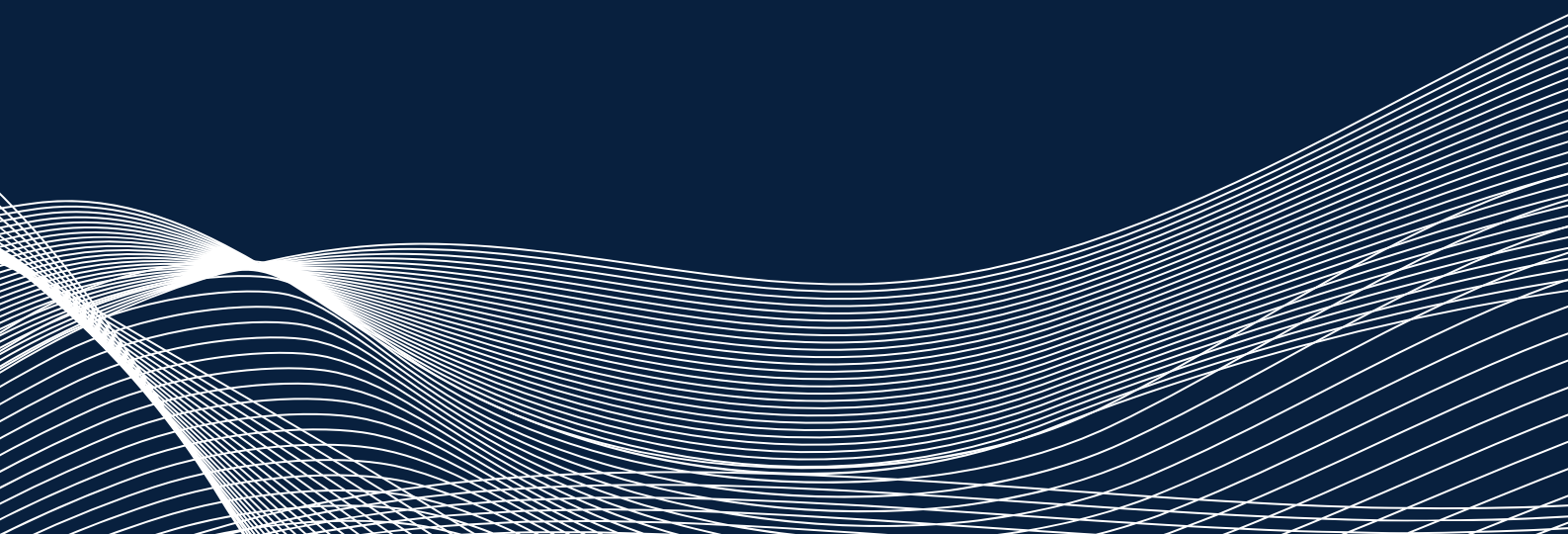
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
of SINGAPORE

symposium

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Symposium is the NUS FASS PPE Club's brand-new publication that aims to allow the community to share their short-form works and creative pieces with a PPE focus. These pieces include op-eds on current affairs, book/film reviews through a PPE lens, or anything related to PPE or the PPE community.

In this first edition, you will find four articles ranging from a suggested PPE reading list to a piece exploring the implications of Singapore's Presidential Elections, as well as two interviews with PPE faculty.

I would like to thank all members of the Academics Committee - David, Isabel, Jessica, Kian Ian, Lauren, Vishnu and Yee Fay - for their contributions over the semester. I would also like to thank our writers for their thoughtful pieces, as well as our faculty members for agreeing to be interviewed.

If you would like to contribute a piece to *Symposium*, please fill in [this form](#) and we will be in touch with you shortly. Cheers and we hope you enjoy reading this!

Shang Wen
Academics Director, AY 23/24
NUS FASS PPE Club

PPE Recommended Reading List

Published 9 September 2023
 Edited by Austin Ho



The combined size of the literature in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics as discrete disciplines makes them intimidating to navigate, with many classic and contemporary works to choose from. However, that does not have to be the case for PPE, being largely centred at the intersection of social philosophy and social science, and thus having a distinct focus as a field of study in its own right. In putting together this list of recommended reads from seniors in the community, the hope is to help you make your next pick if you're in search of new reading material to deepen your understanding of the field.

The readings cover a wide range of theory and praxis, with works by luminaries and giants as well as contemporary writers. In one way or another, you will probably find the readings relevant to the theory of PPE or its application across broad areas of society.

Development Economics

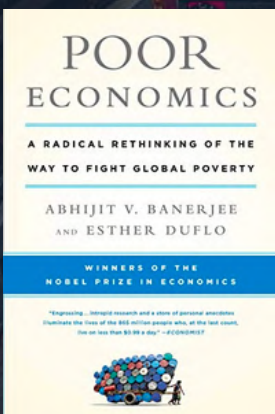
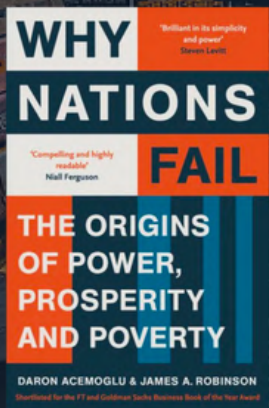
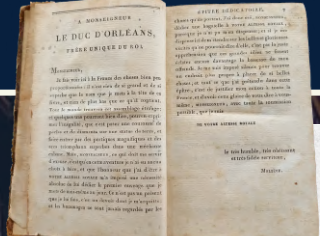
This topic examines the social, political, and economic factors influencing the development of nations, frequently with the aim of understanding and ameliorating conditions in less-developed countries.

Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty (2012)
 by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson

“This book is a really great read if you're interested in inequality! It uncovers how political power serves as the main driver for unfair social outcomes rather than culture, geography, or other oft-blamed factors. It's a long read (600 pages!), but I read it briefly a few years ago and I still think it's an incredibly important piece of work. I think it's used as a textbook in many political science courses in universities around the world, and I can totally see why.”

Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty (2011)
 by Abhijit Banerjee & Esther Duflo

“I haven't personally read this, but it's at the top of my list right now. A senior interested in development recommended this to me, apparently the book is a key textbook for people interested in examining economic reasons and solutions to alleviating the suffering of the world's poorest people. Banerjee is also a very key academic to look to for literature on development and political economy, so I'm really excited to read the book.

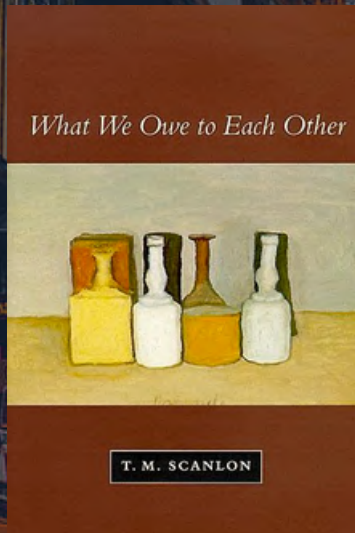


Ethics, Power, & Society

This topic delves into the interplay between ethical systems, power dynamics, and their profound impact on the fabric of society.

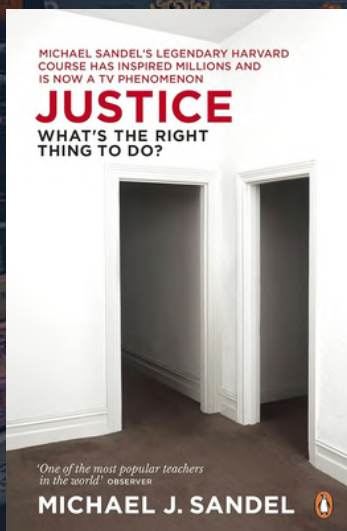
What We Owe to Each Other (1998) by T. M. Scanlon

Scanlon's classic outlines his famous contractualist approach to morality, seeking to provide a universal and impartial basis for ethical judgments.



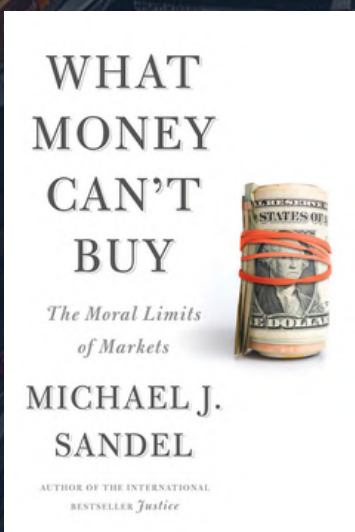
Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do? (2009) by Michael Sandel

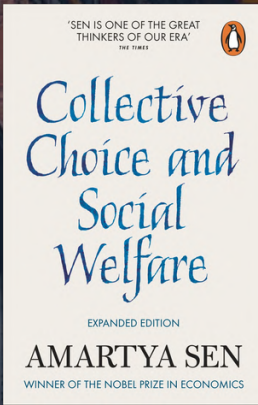
Sandel explores distinct approaches to justice: utilitarian, libertarian, Kantian, Rawlsian, and Aristotelian, and outlines his own conception of justice in this highly accessible book to accompany his famous Harvard course on the same subject.



What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets (2012) by Michael Sandel

“I read this in JC, and it was this book that made me want to study PPE. I loved this book for bringing together philosophy and economics, personally I haven't explored much economic philosophy and I'm not sure how much room there is for it in our PPE syllabus, so it's a good read if you're trying to broaden your horizons a little. It examines how market values encroach into morally questionable areas of our lives. Some instances that I can remember are mentioned in the book are surrogacy and prostitution, which were especially illuminating to think about from a gender studies lens.”





Collective Choice and Social Welfare: An Expanded Edition (2017)

by Amartya Sen

Sen's seminal work probed the ethical dimensions of collective decision-making and resource allocation, contributing significantly to social choice theory, political philosophy, and welfare and development economics. This expanded edition adds new arguments and results, and makes his previous proofs even more accessible than before.

On War (1832) by Carl von Clausewitz

On China (2011) by Henry Kissinger

This classic work explores the nature of total war and its role as an instrument of power, delving into the ethics and politics of armed conflict.

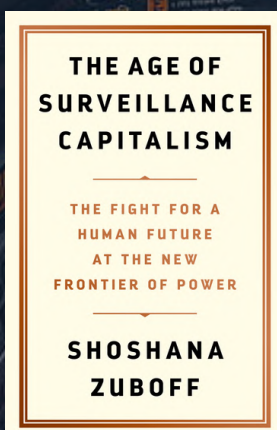
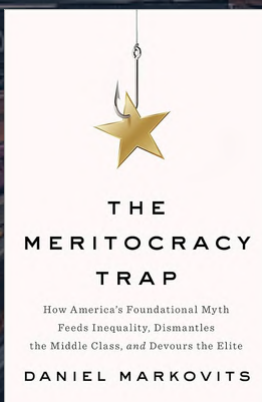
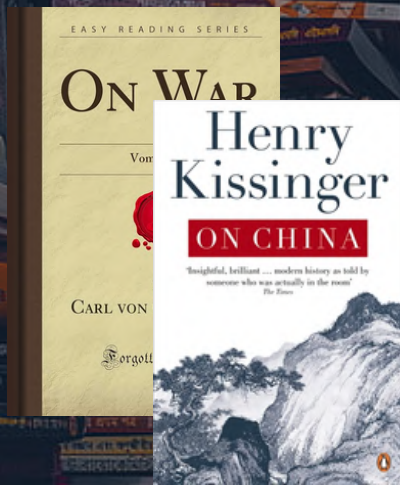
Kissinger's book offers insights into the rise of China in relation to America, addressing the shifting global power dynamics and its implications.

The Meritocracy Trap (2019) by Daniel Markovits

Markovits critiques the meritocratic ideal, highlighting how it can entrench inequality and impact the middle class, examining the ethics of social mobility and success.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power (2019) by Shoshana Zuboff

Zuboff's work investigates the widespread collection and commodification of data by corporations, raising ethical questions about privacy, power, and society.



Challenging the Singaporean Status Quo

Books in this topic chart evolving social, political, and economic dynamics in Singapore, scrutinising local governance, policy, and societal norms.

This Is What

Inequality

Lo

ESSA

Teo



This is What Inequality Looks Like (2018) by Teo You Yenn

This book delves into the pressing issue of economic inequality in Singapore, shedding light on societal disparities and their consequences.

Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus (2014) by Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh

Low and Vadaketh's work critically examines the fading notion of Singaporean exceptionalism and the rising demand for democracy.

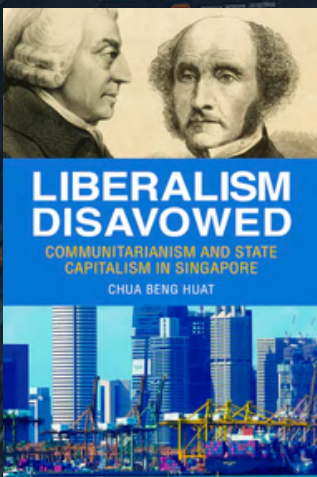
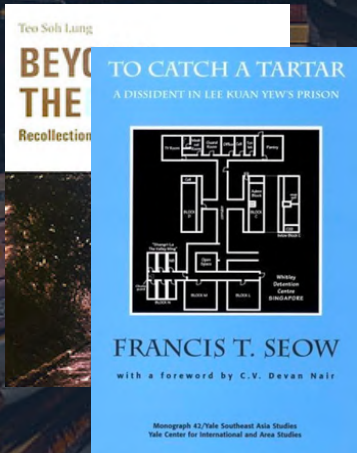
Beyond the Blue Gate: Recollections of a Political Prisoner (2011) by Teo Suh Lung;

To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison (1994) by Francis Seow

These books provide insights into the lesser-known 1987 Marxist conspiracy, which has largely been overlooked in Singaporean politics and history.

Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore (2017) by Chua Beng Huat

Chua's book explores the development of a non-Western ideology for the state, reflecting the ongoing challenges to established political and economic norms in Singapore.



Capitalism and Political Theory

This topic explores the relationship between capitalism and political thought, demonstrating the influence of economic systems on political theorising.

The Communist Manifesto (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

This influential manifesto critiques capitalism and advocates for a communist society, offering a foundational perspective on the tension between capitalism and political theory.

Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract (1861) by T. H. Green

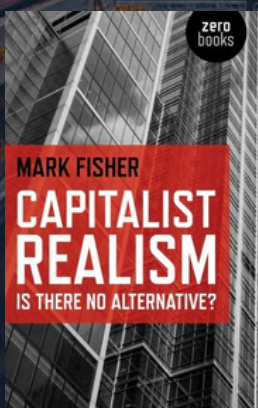
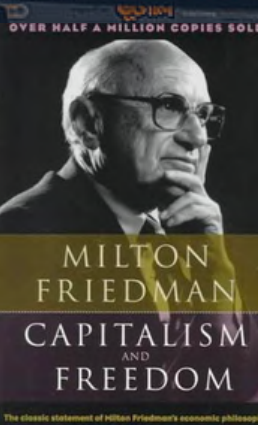
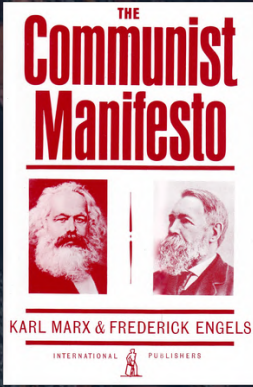
Green's work emphasises the historical importance of balancing individual liberties with societal constraints, and the necessity of aligning restraining laws with the prevailing social sentiment for their effective implementation.

“The Relation between Economic Freedom and Political Freedom” in Capitalism and Freedom (1962) by Milton Friedman
Friedman’s essay underscores the critical role of economic freedom as not only a fundamental liberty, but also a cornerstone of genuine political freedom.

Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (2009) by Mark Fisher
Fisher's work explores the dominance of capitalism in contemporary society, and the idea that envisioning an alternative is an insurmountable challenge. (Credit: Toh Wei Soong)

#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader (2014) edited by Robin MacKay and Armen Avanesian

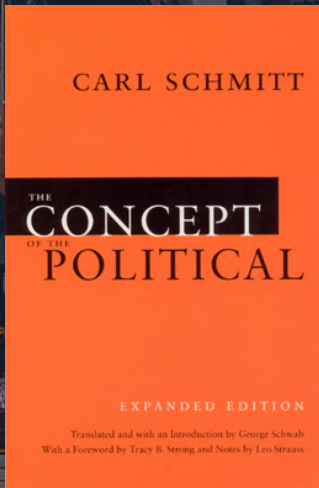
This collection of essays provides a comprehensive overview of accelerationism, which argues for accelerating social and economic processes and pushing systems to their limits for radical change. (Credit: Toh Wei Soong)



Biopolitics

Biopolitics focuses on how states and institutions with extensive social and political power exert control over human life

(Credit: Toh Wei Soong)

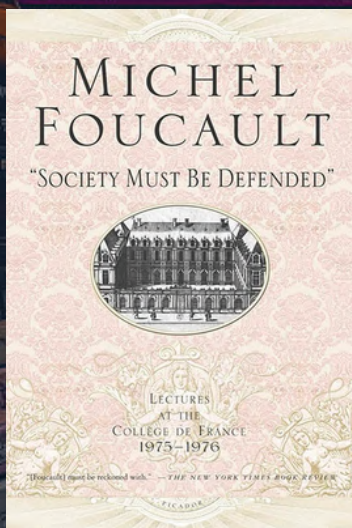


The Concept of the Political (1932) by Carl Schmitt

Schmitt's work introduces the core notion that politics fundamentally revolves around the existential division between friend and enemy, rooted in the inherent diversity of human identities and practices.

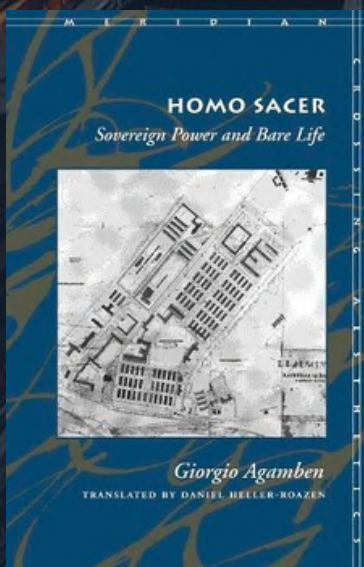
Society Must Be Defended (1976) by Michel Foucault

Foucault's work positions war as the enduring foundation of power structures, unravelling the intertwined origins of power and knowledge that became central to his intellectual life.



Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995) by Giorgio Agamben

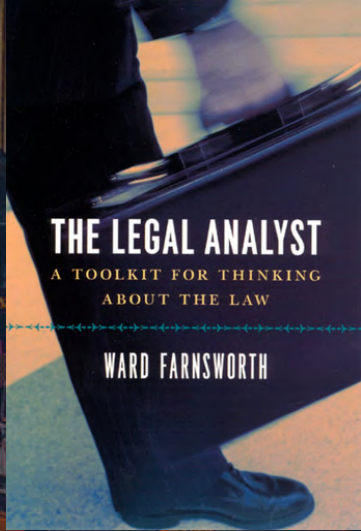
Agamben's work critically examines the power dynamics between the state and individuals, addressing fundamental questions about sovereignty and the nature of political authority.



These next few sections are my personal picks which I found interesting or promising.

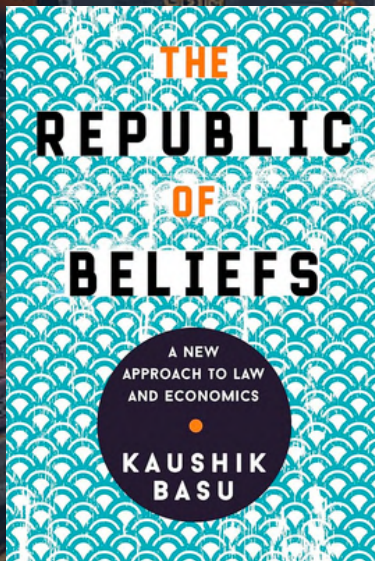
Economic Analysis of Law

Incentives shape legal decisions and vice versa, making it a crucial area for PPE scholars to understand the economic underpinnings of the legal system which regulates society.



The Legal Analyst: A Toolkit for Thinking about the Law (2007) by Ward Farnsworth

Farnsworth's book equips readers with essential methods for analysing the law, from game theory to psychological and jurisprudential principles. These frameworks shed light on the incentive structures and modes of thinking which guide legal decision-making, in ways which are also broadly generalisable to social groups.



The Republic of Beliefs: A New Approach to Law and Economics (2018) by Kaushik Basu

Basu's work introduces a new paradigm for the economic analysis of law, bringing together social norms and the legal system to understand the differences between law in theory and in practice, as implemented and enforced.



Impact: How Law Affects Behaviour (2016) by Lawrence Friedman

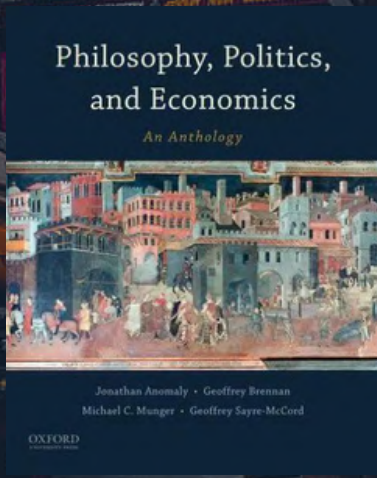
Friedman draws on multiple disciplines in exploring the conditions that render laws and regulations effective, offering a cohesive, interdisciplinary perspective on “impact studies”.

The Behavioural Turn: Economics, Political Epistemology, and Public Policy.

Insights from cognitive and social psychology are exceptionally useful in understanding how cognitive biases and social factors influence political behaviour, departing from the traditional and idealistic models of rational choice. Granting explanatory power to descriptive models of rationality, they advance a more realistic way of understanding human behaviour and decision-making within limits imposed by the mind and the social world, which in turn influences how effective public policies should be crafted.

“Why People are Irrational about Politics” in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology (2016) by Micheal Huemer

Huemer's essay addresses the irrational aspects of political behaviour, a critical concern in the field of political epistemology.



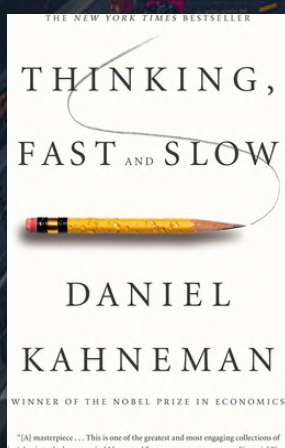
Reasoned Politics (2022) by Magnus Vinding

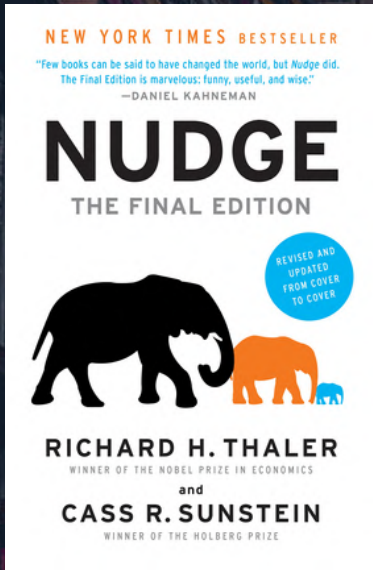
Vinding's book examines the importance of ethics and rationality in political discourse, offering insights into the role of reason and logic within the realm of politics.



Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011) by Daniel Kahneman

Kahneman's seminal work on human cognition distinguishes between “System 1” and “System 2” thinking, important concepts in behavioural economics.





Nudge: The Final Edition (2021) by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein

This classic by pioneers in the field of behavioural public policy introduces the concept of nudging, which aims to guide better decision-making at all levels of society.



Why Nudge?: The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism (2014) by Cass Sunstein

Sunstein's work engages with the political aspects of nudging, justifying libertarian paternalism as an acceptable and legitimate method of governance.

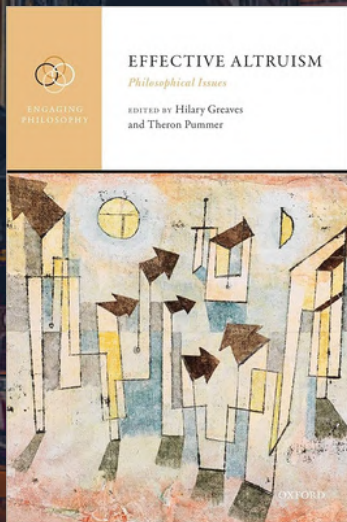


The Ethics of Influence: Government in the Age of Behavioral Science (2016) by Cass Sunstein

This book investigates the ethical aspects of behavioural government interventions in an era where it is on the rise.

Effective Altruism

Effective Altruism (EA) is a movement that lies at the heart of philosophical debates about ethical choices and resource allocation, making it highly relevant to PPE where moral and economic considerations converge in decision-making.



Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues (2019) edited by Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer

This collection offers comprehensive insights into the philosophical, political, and economic aspects of the EA movement, uncovering new questions to be deliberated by those committed to EA's tenets.



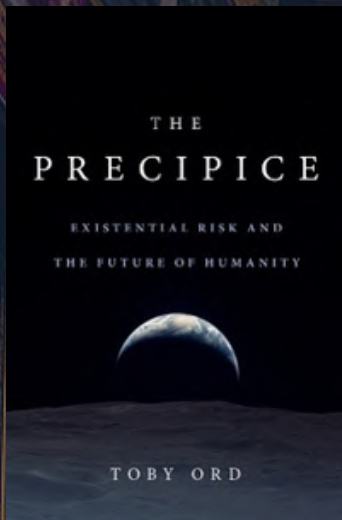
The Good It Promises, The Harm It Does: Critical Essays on Effective Altruism (2023) edited by Carol Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen

This collection of essays scrutinises the potential unintended consequences of EA, raising questions about whether the movement may inadvertently harm the very people it aims to assist in various manners.



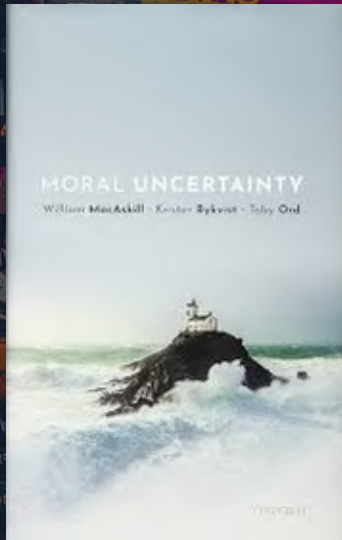
What We Owe The Future (2022) by William MacAskill

MacAskill's book delves into the ethical responsibilities we bear towards future generations, advancing longtermism as a vital component of EA discourse.



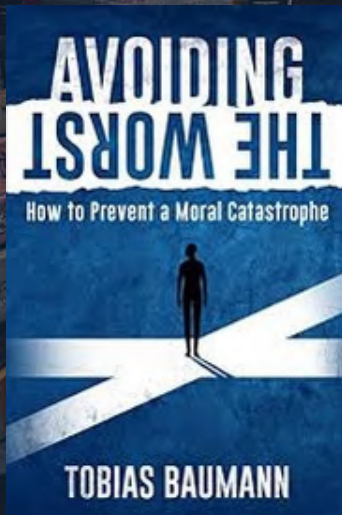
The Precipice (2020) by Toby Ord

Ord's exploration of existential risks (x-risks) and humanity's survival is a key consideration within EA, where ethical decision-making intersects with potential global catastrophes.



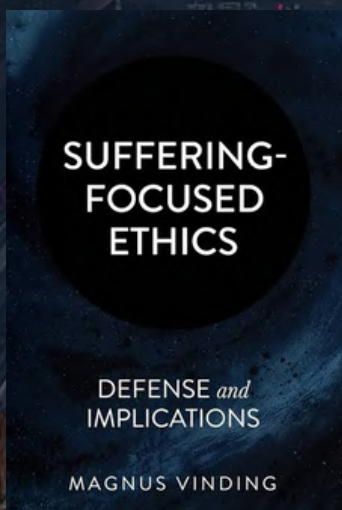
Moral Uncertainty (2020) by William MacAskill, Krister Bykvist, and Toby Ord

This book delves into the complexities of decisions under moral uncertainty, employing social choice approaches to navigate varying moral positions in decision-making.



Avoiding the Worst: How to Prevent a Moral Catastrophe (2022) by Tobias Baumann

Baumann's work outlines the concept of suffering-risks (s-risks) and the impetus for prioritising their reduction.



Suffering-Focused Ethics: Defense and Implications (2020) by Magnus Vinding

Vinding's book emphasises the pressing need to address and halt suffering, positioning it as complementary to other theories of moral philosophy.

There are many more works worth your time, but which unfortunately had to be omitted for brevity. As a tip, keep an eye out for books in particular topics within PPE like those suggested above, and for authors who publish works relevant to the field, such as

Amartya Sen (Harvard)	Keith Hankins (Chapman)
Jason Brennan (Georgetown)	Kevin Vallier (BGSU)
Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (UNC-CH)	Chris Melenovsky (Suffolk)
Geoffrey Brennan (UNC-CH)	Erik Angner (Stockholm)
Bryan Caplan (GMU)	Andreas Schmidt (Groningen)
Gerald Gaus (Arizona)	Tan Kok-Chor (UPenn)
John Thrasher (Chapman)	Lisa Herzog (Groningen)
Bas van der Vossen (Chapman)	Justin Bruner (SUNY Buffalo)

There are also book lists available as part of reading groups in PPE programmes throughout the world, such as [Reading Groups – PPE Program](#).

As Seneca warned, however:

Be careful, though, about your reading in many authors and every type of book. It may be that there is something wayward and unstable in it. You must stay with a limited number of writers and be fed by them if you mean to derive anything that will dwell reliably with you. One who is everywhere is nowhere. [...] The same thing necessarily happens to those who do not become intimate with any one author, but let everything rush right through them. [...] since you cannot read everything you have, it is sufficient to have only the amount you can read.

– in “Letter 2: A beneficial reading program”, *Fifty Letters of a Roman Stoic* (2021, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long)

Nonetheless, as long as we remain judicious, an open mind admits more topics into the arena of ideas in the field to be scrutinised, or more broadly, as intelligible through its analytical frameworks. In the vein of “the philosophy of X”, “the politics of X”, and “the economics of X”, it is my belief that we will eventually be able to advance “the PPE of X” as a synthesised approach to understanding social phenomena—a door to a world inflected by PPE lenses, first pried open through extensive reading and understanding. With that in mind, happy reading, and thank you to the seniors for your contributions!

The Morality of War Crimes - through the lens of J. Robert Oppenheimer

Published 17 September 2023

written by Isabel Yamada edited by Lim Kian Ian



Note: Explanations for bolded concepts can be found in the glossary at the end of the article.

Oppenheimer has been released for close to one and a half months now, dominating the global box office with a staggering \$38.1 million. Christopher Nolan's blockbuster film is a microscopic character study of the man, the myth and the legend behind the Manhattan Project – J. Robert Oppenheimer. The film presents perennial moral dilemmas surrounding weapons of mass destruction and scientific advancements that remain relevant in the 21st century, amidst the volatility of polarising international conflicts. Oppenheimer's life, in all its rawness and vulnerability, has been flashed on screens across the world for contemporary society to – in the words of Cillian Murphy himself – “judge (him) as we wish”. This essay thus serves to peer more closely through Nolan's lens and Oppenheimer's eyes, adopting both **Kantian Duty Ethics** and **Utilitarianism** to reflect firstly, on the morality of dropping the atomic bomb

as a war crime, and secondly, on scientific progress.

In most moral philosophies, dropping the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be unjustified. The **Categorical Imperative** in Kantian Duty Ethics states that in order for morals to be upheld, we must act according to the maxim by which one can, and at the same time, will that it should become universal law, and that humans must be viewed as an end themselves. The sheer destruction resulting from the dropping of the A-bomb severely undermined principles of **jus in bello**, and by that same logic, is completely unjustified under **deontological ethics**.

Perhaps it is only under theories of **Consequentialism**, such as Utilitarianism, that such war crimes may be justified; that is, when one's utility or happiness is maximised in choosing the right course of action (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1879). While **Act Utilitarianism** seeks to achieve the common, greater good by choosing the course of action that maximises benefit, when the decision was made by President Truman to drop the A-bomb, neither

Oppenheimer, nor the US government, had the means to accurately determine the gains or losses that would ensue from a war crime of this scale and novelty.

In the movie, the “near zero”, but ultimately non-zero, chance of destroying the world, is a horrific revelation of the arbitrary nature of metrics that serve as the bedrock for nuclear weaponry use and war crimes. This ultimately testifies against decision-making agents’ ability to fully take into account the additive consequences of an action. **Modal discourse**, such as **counterfactual reasoning**, which is concerned with what is not, but what could or would have been, is central for rational decision-making (Starr, 2019).

Rule Utilitarianism could not present a more hopeful case for the dropping of the A-bomb either. Rule Utilitarians “judge the morality of individual actions by reference to general moral rules, and the correct moral rules are those rules whose general acceptance would maximise wellbeing” (Nathanson, 2011). Under Rule Utilitarianism, it would be reasonable to propose that we ought not to cause mass destruction, unless it prevents further destruction down the line. However, such a moral rule projects future outcomes that transcend time and space, especially in the context of the A-bomb — a weapon of mass destruction of complete novelty. Hence, by the theory of **Rule Utilitarianism**, considering counterfactuals beyond preexisting scientific parameters and the limits of human imagination was necessary but challenging. Historical sources indicate that when the

decision was made, the military had estimated that half-a-million American casualties, and many more Japanese lives would be saved through the use of the atomic bomb to end the war (Compton, 1946).

There was also the highly plausible outcome that other countries would want greater stakes in the nuclear arms race, and America was not about to jeopardise their newly established *carte blanche* as military superpower and global leader (Rivage-Seul, 1987). However, quantifying more unfamiliar outcomes of counterfactual alternatives, even with algorithms like **Bayesian networks** or **causal decision theories** (Weirich, 2020), would have been impossible without a complex degree of imagination or critical consciousness, coined by Freire and Himmelkert to be **conscientização** and “**transcendental imagination**” respectively (Freire, 1968; Hinkelammert, 2012). This is especially given the prevalence of many independent variables, including but not limited to the opportunity



cost of the \$2.2 billion invested in the Manhattan Project alone, 4 years in war, and Truman's firsthand warfare experience from World War I which undoubtedly impacted his military leadership strategies. Herein lies the limitation of using Utilitarianism to justify the dropping of the bomb.

Beyond the pivotal historical act of dropping the bomb, the morality of the act of scientific development of the A-bomb in itself has also invited scrutiny. As we delve into Oppenheimer's stream of consciousness during the film, we are forced to contend with complex emotions compounded by guilt and helplessness, but also selfishness and ambition, as Oppenheimer becomes aware of how his personal passion pursuit is being morphed into a weapon of mass destruction. Based on factual accounts, Oppenheimer was always characterised to be morally conflicted – on one hand, he dissuaded Edward Teller from circulating Szilard's petition to the government that advised against using the bomb on Japan, without first allowing Japanese surrender. Oppenheimer justified this with his belief that “scientists have no business to meddle in political pressure of that kind” (Teller; Schweber, 2000). On the other hand, especially in later years, he acknowledged the “peculiarly intimate responsibility (of physicists) for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realisation of atomic weapons” (Schweber, 2000). The infamous line in Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer from the Bhagavad Gita, “Now I am become Death, Destroyer of Worlds”, though dramatised,

accurately encapsulated the religious and moral tensions that plagued Oppenheimer throughout his scientific endeavours, which became more evident in the post-war period.

If we were to approach Oppenheimer's moral dilemma of developing the bomb itself, we could use both Utilitarianism and Kantian Deontology to analyse the issue. The spirit of scientific pursuit, which in this case involved intense research into quantum mechanics and atomic energy, on its own follows Kant's Categorical Imperative. Furthermore, **moral luck** under Kantian deontology dismisses Oppenheimer's moral culpability over bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on the basis that Oppenheimer had little to no agency over how the bomb would be used. However, we could also argue that the distinct and specialised purpose of the Manhattan Project – to build a functional nuclear weapon for potential use against the Germans (TNA, 1942) – highlights that this scientific pursuit had a crystallised intention. Thus, given that intentionality of action is the basis of agency (Scholsser, 2019), scientific advancement with the intention of developing a nuclear weapon not only fails the categorical imperative, but also renders Kant's moral luck argument invalid. Hence, this scientific undertaking is immoral from the perspective of Kantian ethics.

By the theories of Act and Just Utilitarianism, the case presented supporting scientists behind the bomb is much more bleak. Following the Consequentialist train of thought, the evaluation of net pleasure or pain resulting

from this scientific endeavour must be extended to the point post-bombing, instead of passing moral judgements solely based on intention as Kantian Duty Ethics would.

Severe critics of the building of the bomb adopt non-Kantian perspectives on moral luck, which claims agents can still be correctly assigned blame or praise for the eventual consequences of their actions irregardless of their lack of control (Nelkin, 2019). It can be concluded that the directing of the bomb to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though not within Oppenheimer's jurisdiction, was still an outcome of his actions, and thus demanded reproof. On the other hand, Utilitarianism also leaves room to explore the pleasurable outcomes of the Manhattan project. I would postulate that instead of imposing a damning indictment of immorality on the scientists at Los Alamos, there is still nuance to be navigated, in that their work offered exciting possibilities for energy markets and civilians. By successfully starting a fission chain reaction in the reactor-pile of Uranium-238 to produce the fissionable material Plutonium-239, Oppenheimer's team provided the basis of calculation and theory not just for nuclear weapons, but for further development of nuclear energy. Following the Great Depression and World War II from 1929 to 1945, the nuclear energy industry could have provided a beacon of hope for economic recovery for different societies, if peaceful

negotiations for international cooperation had been made early on.

Massive efforts to explore peaceful uses of nuclear energy amongst civilians (US Department of Energy, 1994) preceded the golden age of nuclear energy from the 70s to 90s. Therefore, in weighing out net pleasure and pain, we could find justifications for this scientific endeavour. '

I think it was interesting to note that the film was also an in-depth exploration of Oppenheimer's guilt. Guilt and psychological burdens borne by the scientists was a central motif throughout Nolan's film, and we see this portrayed artfully in the victory speech scene, where the overlaying of effects of thumping of feet, shifty eyes, vomiting, suffering and helplessness encapsulated the weight that Oppenheimer had to bear as the man behind the bomb. Granted that an action has been deemed morally right under Utilitarianism, in that it would lead to the greatest amount of pleasure and least amount of pain, could guilt then offset and eliminate controversy surrounding the very fact that innocent lives were sacrificed in a decision? I believe Oppenheimer's regret could not undermine the immorality of his scientific pursuits, however it could on a more personal level, allow us to better empathise with his moral dilemmas, rather than completely vilifying his character.

“No scientist, no matter how aware he may be of these fruits of his science, cultivates his work, or refrains from it, because of arguments such as these. No scientist can hope to evaluate what his studies, his researches, his experiments may in the end produce for his fellow men, except in one respect—if they are sound, they will produce knowledge.” These were the words of J. Robert Oppenheimer in one of his many post-war reflections (Schweber, 2000). Science itself is neutral, but the consequentialist perspective always requires us to consider what science is being used for, while Kantian deontology as a moral theory keeps us grounded in how scientific research should be purposed. As we navigate the 21st century that is both fraught with international conflict and marked by the burgeoning of scientific advancement and military technology, it is now even more crucial that we cling on to the moral philosophies that undergird our existence as humans, and safeguard the very depths of our heart and consciousness.

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Glossary of key concepts

1. **Act Utilitarianism:** A moral theory that claims the best course of action is one that maximises net benefit, and calculates utility of an individual action each time the act is performed.
2. **Bayesian Networks:** A type of causal notation which uses a probabilistic graphical model to represent a set of variables and their conditional dependencies, and is a helpful tool for probability computations.
3. **Categorical Imperative:** A central concept in Kantian Duty Ethics that represents actions as objectively necessary in itself, without reference to any other purpose.
4. **Causal Decision Theory:** A theory that defines one's expected utility and determines if a choice is rational or if it maximises utility.
5. **Conscientização:** A term coined by Paulo Freire to describe critical consciousness, an in-depth understanding of the world that allows for social and political contradictions or nuances, hence giving rise to the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it.
6. **Consequentialism:** A branch of moral philosophy where justifying if an act is morally right or wrong depends only on consequences, whereby other factors such as intention are irrelevant.
7. **Counterfactuals:** Arguments that are subjunctive conditionals, whereby the conditionals discuss what could have been true under different circumstances.
8. **Deontology:** A branch of moral philosophy where justifying if an act is morally right or wrong is determined by its inherent nature and cannot be affected by any of its consequences.
9. **Jus In Bello:** The international law that governs how parties should engage in armed conflict and war.
10. **Kantian Duty Ethics:** A branch of moral philosophy influenced by Immanuel Kant that is concerned with the intention of the act.
11. **Modal Discourse:** Discussion that concerns alternative outcomes of situations, such as what could have been, what isn't true or what should be done.
12. **Moral Luck:** Occurs when agents are assigned moral blame or praise for an action, despite not having full agency over the action or its consequences.
13. **Rule Utilitarianism:** A moral theory that claims a morally right action is one that imposes a rule leading to the best outcome for society, and calculates the overall utility of accepting or rejecting the rule.
14. **Transcendental Imagination:** Imagination that envisions the fullness of human life in which institutions are more fluid than absolute.
15. **Utilitarianism (Classic):** A moral theory that claims a right action is one that maximises happiness or total net pleasure.

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The Future of Identity Politics in Singapore

Published 10 October 2023
written by Adriaal Pang
edited by Lauren Tan



Now that President Tharman has been inaugurated, I think it is timely to look beyond the 70.41% who voted for him, and further scrutinise the voters at the margins, in order to figure out what lessons we should draw from how the votes ended up being split. What are we to make of the 344,584 Singaporeans who voted for Mr Tan Kin Lian? Why did Mr Tan not poll higher? Why not lower?

Mr Tan generated significant buzz during the campaign. On separate occasions, he had:

- questioned “the honesty and integrity of the media”;
- posted about “pretty girls” and migrant workers on Facebook;
- expressed his view that “Singapore would be better if half of the female population [chose] to be homemakers”;
- announced that he would use the non-partisan office of the President to tackle “cost of living” issues faced by Singaporeans;
- faulted PAP ministers for “not [being] in touch with ordinary people” and being “quite arrogant”;

- asserted that the total size of Singapore’s reserves need not be kept a secret;
- argued that the GST should be scrapped;
- suggested that Singapore “bring down our costs of property, of wages”, to become more competitive;
- conjectured that “deep down, our locals would prefer at least a chance to have the President and the First Lady to be true Singaporeans, from birth”; and
- toyed with the possibility of nominating opposition politicians Mr Tan Jee Say and Dr Tan Cheng Bock to the Council of Presidential Advisors, were he to be elected.

Mr Tan was promptly called out whenever he articulated factual inaccuracies. During Channel NewsAsia’s Presidential Forum, many dubbed news anchor Otelli Edwards’s correction of Mr Tan’s claims as “live POFMA”.

Straits Times Deputy News Editor Grace Ho also offered a factual correction to Mr Tan’s claim that the government’s Covid-19 support grants were inappropriately used to boost the profits of banks.

I think the criticism and contestation of ideas that came to pass was fair game in Singapore's maturing democracy - this is to be expected in any political contest. The majority of political pundits were also nuanced in their analysis of Mr Tan, resisting the urge to oversimplify him, or vilify his entire being.

However, I fear that some criticism stray into the territory of identity politics, and encourage disrespect of the people who voted for Mr Tan.

Two examples come to mind: Straits Times Opinion Editor Lin Suling said that Mr Tan "ran a divisive campaign... brazening out the misogynistic comments he made about pretty girls." Jom's editor-in-chief Sudhir Vadaketh remarked that Mr Tan's "candidacy has, however, been tarnished by his troubling history of xenophobic and misogynistic posts."

Would readers of The Straits Times and Jom emerge thinking that Mr Tan is a misogynist, or a xenophobe? Would that be a fair and nuanced characterisation? How true is it that Mr Tan was "brazen", or "troubling"? Mr Tan himself also objected to AWARE's criticism of him "objectifying women".

In the era of instant online communication, we are more likely to see quick and snarky TikTok comments (e.g. "TKL is sexist"), rather than fleshed-out opinions like "Though Mr Tan may not have made that Facebook post with ill intentions, it risks perpetuating misogyny." However, what we gain in speed, we lose in nuance.

Imagine a short comment like "TKL is sexist", which you may find in the comments section of a YouTube video or an Instagram post. A reader casually scrolling on the other side of the screen will be hard-pressed to discern nuance and formulate a fair opinion of Mr Tan.

In the same vein, rather than critique Mr Tan's "nativist comments", he instead becomes "the nativist". Rather than assess his campaign promises for the degree to which they pander to populism, we may instead be tempted to conveniently brand him a "populist" or "demagogue".

Finally, we may fail to see "people who voted for Mr Tan Kin Lian", instead clumping them together as "Tan Kin Lian voters", as if they are

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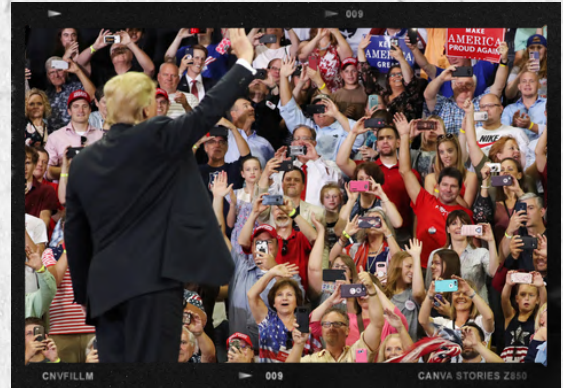
a self-evident, monolithic and backwards coalition, worthy of disparagement.

I think America's experience with identity politics should scare us into action - to proactively strengthen our democratic safeguards and norms. In the US, one's political identity has swallowed up and superseded all other identities - your race, religion, region, class, age, gender, occupation, role in the family - they all come second to whether you are a Democrat or a Republican. Ezra Klein eloquently expounds on this concept of the political "super-identity" in his book *Why We're Polarized*.

A simple test to uncover just how strong of a grip identity politics has on our current discourse: when I mention "Trump voters", what policy positions do you think of? Anti-vaccine? Anti-abortion? Anti-immigration? We instantly associate one particular identity with a whole slew of stereotypes and assumptions, leaving little room for nuance and idiosyncrasy, and even obfuscating reality - President Trump claims credit for Operation Warp Speed which accelerated the development of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and thus cannot be neatly placed into the anti-vaccine camp.

The danger of simplistic labels like "Trump voters" illustrates why I am adamant about political pundits using the phrase "people who voted for Mr Tan Kin Lian", rather than the identity label of "Tan Kin Lian voter". The former opens up the possibility of follow-up questions like "What were your considerations

in deciding to vote for him?", while the latter exacerbates the tendency to hunker down on a narrow identity and suck the oxygen out of nuanced and empathetic discussion.



It is easier to dismiss the stereotypical "Tan Kin Lian voter" as an aberration, when you do not foreground the "people" they are, worthy of respect and consideration.

This is not to say that irresponsible conduct in the political sphere should go unpunished. Admittedly, there were three moments when I feared that this Presidential Election would take a Trumpian turn.

Firstly, when, on Nomination Day, Mr Tan criticised the news outlets in Singapore with the following words, which reminded me of President Trump lambasting "fake news" and snubbing the tradition of hosting the White House Correspondents' Dinner: "Later on I realised, it is a concerted effort to smear me. And I also realised, that the media, the editors are part of this arrangement... I want to say something to the media. The people trust you to be honest and fair. Now, how can you just smear me, based upon something which is quite frivolous, and you make it into a big issue. So I think I will have to say about [sic] the honesty and integrity of the media..."

Secondly, when Mr Tan's supporters were encouraged to volunteer as counting agents, and keep their own records of how many votes were cast for each of the candidates. Yes, this is fair game in a transparent election. Yet, I could not help drawing parallels with the 2020 US Presidential Election, where Republicans had casted aspersions on mail-in ballots and Dominion voting machines, and were paradoxically chanting "stop the count" in one state and "count the votes" in another.

Thirdly, when M Ravi and Iris Koh painted Mr Tharman as an unconstitutional candidate. Akin to how President Trump casted doubt on the integrity of the 2020 US Presidential Election and instigated the January 6 US Capitol attack, I had feared that this loose end could have been exploited to subvert the election results. Thankfully, Mr Tan acted responsibly and conceded defeat. However, I wonder if Mr Tan had the obligation to publicly denounce M Ravi and Iris Koh's actions.

Luckily, all three situations came to pass, and I was simply a worrywart this time round. Nevertheless, I echo Dr Gillian Koh's op-ed for

The Straits Times, and agree that there are pressing improvements we must make to the procedures governing the Elected Presidency, in order to shore up our defences against opportunistic demagogues who may want to hijack our Presidency in the future.

We cannot be sure that future candidates will not "pull a Trump", cast doubt on the integrity of Singapore's voting processes, and subvert an election. Are our current defences like POFMA and the judicial system sufficient? Or should we prevent such instances from emerging in the first place?

Circling back to identity politics, even as we await new procedural safeguards to be introduced, it is incumbent upon all of us to start work on bolstering our social safeguards. We can reach out, across our political differences, to better empathise with our fellow Singaporeans' perspectives. We can also resist simplistic labels that play into the hands of identity politics. Finally, as President Tharman said repeatedly during his campaign, "No one should be a nobody in Singapore". We would do well to ensure Respect For All.



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**Nintendo**

Animal Crossing: Philosophy Of

*Published 8 November 2023
written by Lim Kian Ian
edited by David Lim Ming Quan*

When was the last time you did absolutely nothing? Time set aside just to exist. I feel that human beings have a desire to be busy. Most people seem to believe that there is some intrinsic good to being busy. If we were to stop for just one second, we fear that we would be labelled as lazy. I know I have fallen into this “busy trap” [1], especially after starting university. After a gruelling 6 weeks, recess week had come and I finally had some time to slow down. Pulling myself away from my work, I glanced at the switch next to my monitor. It then hit me: I had not tended to my island in Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) in months!

ACNH is an adorable sandbox game made by Nintendo for the Nintendo Switch. ACNH was released in March 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and has since soared in popularity. Dropped onto an island in the middle of nowhere, you are “parachuted” [2] into the role of mayor and left in charge of running the island as you see fit. Not to fear, as you are aided by Tom Nook (a Tanuki who has been depicted on the internet as the landlord of the island with a monopoly on property) and Isabelle (a Shih Tzu and the island’s administrator).

Your job is to grow the island and make it habitable for other villagers to move in, pay off your home loans imposed on you forcefully by Tom Nook, and engage in consumerism.

The most interesting thing about ACNH is that the game does nothing much in the way of incentivising players to progress, in the traditional sense. Games usually have some distinct end goal: resolving a narrative, overcoming a final challenge, or fulfilling the main objective. However, in ACNH, after a short tutorial on how the game works, the player is pretty much left to their own devices. There are some incentives in the form of a premium in-game currency, Nook Miles, which players can acquire by completing optional goals like paying off their mortgage. Players are nevertheless not penalised for not pursuing these goals. Instead, one can sit down on the beach, listening to the crashing of waves, the rustling of palms, and the beautifully crafted soundtrack.

If there is no pressure to play the game, then why are so many people, myself included, drawn to such a game? Of course, there are many reasons one can cite, including how the game’s incentives and optional goals are good enough to engage the player. However, I believe the main reason that drew people into the game was: agency.

Agency, as defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “denotes the exercise or manifestation of ... [an agent’s] capacity [to act]” (Schlosser, 2019). In other words, agency refers to our ability to choose what we want to do. In ACNH, we are given more agency compared to other games. The player gets to choose what they want to do. The player can do everything mentioned above or just lounge around, essentially mimicking their real-life selves in the game. For example, I stayed up till 2 a.m. sitting around my Animal Crossing home after spending the entire day remodelling it. I also went around my museum to admire the fossil collection I completed a few days prior, reading all the descriptions the game gave for each fossil display. The ability to choose to do seemingly nothing at all points to the higher level of agency provided by ACNH compared to most games.

Agency also manifests in ACNH in how the game gives the player more abilities and options for decoration on the island.

This is the first Animal Crossing game that allows the players to decorate their entire island with purchased items bought with in-game currency, bells. Players can also change the very landscape of their island. If they want to add a river, hill, or even a garden, they can do it in ACNH. All these new freedoms and abilities allow the player, an agent, to exercise their agency.

Giving the player this much agency allows the player to question the purposes of their action. Why is it that they would gladly stay up to literally just walk around their island? The answer might be to admire what they have achieved, but I retort with: what was the achievement? Painstakingly collecting all the fossils in the game is a task that nets no tangible benefit to the player other than completing said collection. Here, the Dutch concept of *Niksen* might be able to help us understand why people may want to undertake actions which may have no inherent meaning.



A screenshot depicting the Island Town Hall in Animal Crossing.
(L-R) Tom Nook, Player, Isabelle.

Niksen is a Dutch word meaning: “To do nothing, to be idle, or doing something without any use” (Gottfried, 2019). The easiest way to practise Niksen is to simply sit in your chair and do nothing. Niksen asks one to not think at all, to let the mind wander and remain free. Practitioners are not limited to literally remaining idle. They can be engaged in a task, but that task should not preoccupy the mind. The mind has to be allowed to roam while the body busies itself with the task. In essence, whatever we do, the action itself cannot be the focus. Niksen has been shown to reduce a person’s stress and likelihood of burning out, and I feel that this is a very intuitive concept to grasp. When our mind is occupied by a temporary task, the important task is brought out of focus and we are less bothered by it.

We can see parallels to this in the tasks undertaken in ACNH. All the actions done in-game have no use by themselves. Rather, ACNH serves as a medium for the player to let their mind and creativity wander as they engage in tasks that seem monotonous. Imagine chopping down a tree, getting wood to craft items, selling said items for bells, and using those bells to pay off a mortgage. A mortgage to a house that you are not even living in in real life. What I described might be

seen as a chore to most people. However, when packaged in a game like ACNH, with its design aesthetic and characters, it suddenly feels inviting. ACNH involves a player’s choice, the exercising of their agency, to play in that manner. We become willing to spend time in ACNH because it allows us to choose to do meaningless tasks that decompress us from the stresses that may be, simultaneously allowing us to re-evaluate our actions for doing things.

After all this exploration, what is it that I am trying to drive at? We have become increasingly predisposed to accept the idea that being busy is good, especially when placed in an environment that values and rewards such busy-ness. ACNH reminds us of the importance of rediscovering the purposes behind the actions we take. Moreover, ACNH is a fascinating topic for the average PPE student. ANCH has a surprisingly complex economy that has been interwoven with our real-world economy in the form of a black market, and how the politics of the 2020 US Presidential Election [3] and Hong Kong riots bled into people’s islands [4]. This shall be a topic for another day. For now, let us do a little nothing and Welcome Horizon [5].

“

Niksen asks one to not think at all, to let the mind wander and remain free.

Notes

[1] The Busy Trap was an opinion piece written in 2012 by Tim Kreider and published in the New York Times. It suggested that the average American had more things going on than they did in the past.

[2] “Parachuted” is Singaporean slang used to describe high-ranking military personnel getting a high-profile job in the public sector after exiting the military.

[3] The Biden administration campaigned in ACNH during the 2020 election. This led to the creation of “Biden Island”, which voters could visit to learn more about his campaign and their voting rights.

[4] During the Hong Kong riots in 2020, some people took to ACNH to decorate their islands with anti-Chinese propaganda and post images online. They went as far as to take their fishing nets and repeatedly whack an image of Carrie Lam, head of government of Hong Kong, placed on an easel.

[5] Welcome Horizon is the ACNH opening theme played by K.K. Slider, ACNH’s in-game celebrity music artist.

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An Interview with Dr Joel Chow



*Published 29 October 2023
conducted by Ng Shang Wen*

On 18th September 2023, we sat down to have a chat with Dr Joel Chow, the Club's Staff Advisor, as part of a series of interviews with faculty members.

Note: This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Shang Wen: Hi Prof! Let's start with some questions about your academic interests. What inspired your interest and pursuit of philosophy?

Joel Chow: I've always been interested in philosophical questions, especially questions about moral responsibility or how we should act in the world. I've also been very interested in the question of what is rational, how people should act under certain kinds of situations or decisions, and how they should be guided by certain kinds of rules or norms. Of course, that language is kind of technical, but it began out of an interest in trying to understand how humans behave and why they behave that way.

Typically, people turn to psychology to understand that, right? However, I found that these are deeply philosophical questions because as I was reading more about psychology, I realized actually there are a lot of philosophical concepts that are employed. So, that led me to try to understand those questions.

Shang Wen: So I think you mentioned rationality and norms of human beings. Does part of that explain what made you focus specifically on PPE as opposed to, more generally, philosophy?

Joel Chow: Yes, so that was a question I had when I started my undergraduate studies. I was very interested in trying to understand human behavior, how humans interact with one another, and why they would accept, you know, certain kinds of rules, right? I always like to say it's a bit like magic, if someone asks you to do something and then you do it without coercion. In fact, philosophers are very puzzled by this behavior. How does a request or obligation have some kind of binding force on people? They are puzzled by this and so naturally that also led me to think about questions in economics. So why do people behave the way they do? Why do people, if they are rational in the way that economics says they are, why would they act in certain kinds of ways? So those are questions that naturally arise. So they have led me again to focus in on

more PPE questions.

Shang Wen: In the field of PPE, what specific areas of PPE are you most interested in?

Joel Chow: (It goes back to) the question(s) about how do people come from small-scale micro interactions to set up institutions, how do people engage in markets? Why? What are the moral limits of markets and how should societies organize themselves? Those are the enduring questions of PPE, and those are the questions that I'm most interested in.

But recently, I have also been very interested in applying methods and techniques from PPE to relatively new areas. So, for example, some people want to use PPE methods to understand how people learn from one another or interact with one another. Or how people might actually engage in activity where they learn in groups and share results.

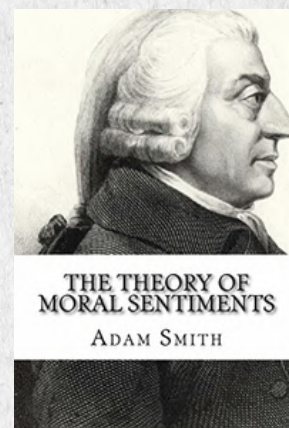
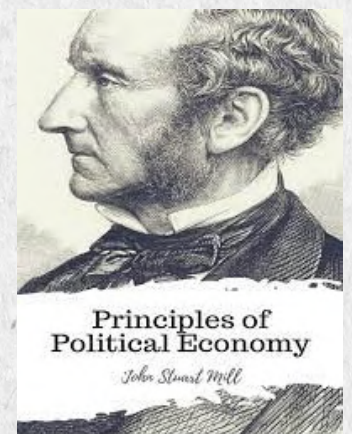
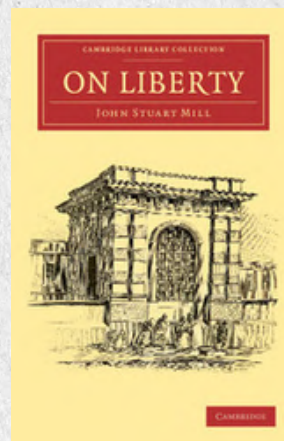
But my enduring questions that I am most interested in have always been about how should states govern citizens? Should the state regulate the market? How should citizens interact with the market? Those are the big PPE questions, and I've always been interested in those.

Shang Wen: I see. I think just now you mentioned the moral limits of markets. I think that's (from) Michael Sandel, right?

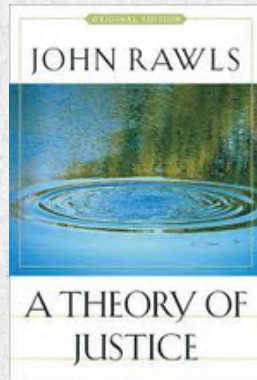
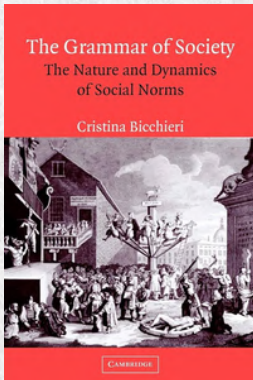
Joel Chow: Yes.

Shang Wen: So on that note, what books would you recommend to an aspiring PPE major? You know, we just had a reading list published by Austin, so we thought you could add onto that.

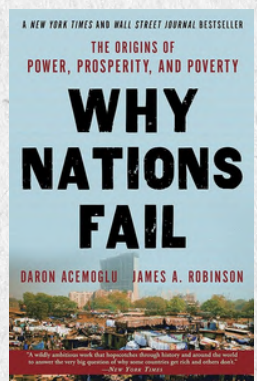
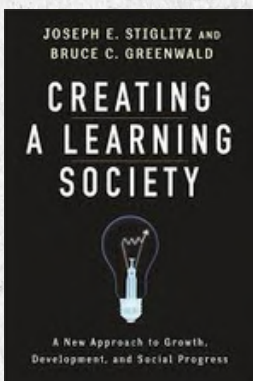
Joel Chow: Of course, Sandel's work will be one of the few key classics. If we go through the sort of more kind of historical canonical works, **On Liberty** by John Stuart Mill is a very important book. John Stuart Mill's **Principles of Political Economy** is another important book, although a more difficult one to read. Adam Smith's **Theory of Moral Sentiments** is another one, but those are historical works that I think are useful to contextualize certain things. I would also recommend that we understand certain kinds of Chinese philosophy like Confucian thinking.



Canonical contemporary works that I think are worth reading: one of them, one of my favourites, is this book by Cristina Bicchieri called **The Grammar of Society** which I covered in some very small form in (my) Introduction to PPE. Another big work is **A Theory of Justice** by John Rawls.



In terms of economic work that you can learn a lot from, there's this book by Joseph Stiglitz, **Creating a Learning Society**, as well as the classic, **Why Nations Fail**, by Darren Acemoglu and James Robinson.



That being said, I really think these are all very big books, hard to digest and read. However, I think these are books that will give you a sort of empirical scaffolding and allow you to think about the normative questions that I mentioned.

Shang Wen: I think this next question might be a little bit difficult. Of the three disciplines of P, P and E, which discipline do you think PPE is most anchored in?

Joel Chow: Honestly, I would say that it's most anchored in two, rather than one, and that is philosophy and economics. The reason being that, if we look very closely, we see that a lot of PPE questions arise from the intersection between philosophy and economics. For example, the moral limits of markets. You can't talk about that without talking about [the] efficient market hypothesis. You can't talk about it without thinking about perfect market conditions. You can't talk about that without talking about some philosophical questions. You should talk about it using a lens of political science, but it's possible to discuss those questions without actually bringing in political science. So, that's what I mean by necessary.

And we look at another idea about, say, rationality and decision theory. You can have that whole discussion without bringing in political science — you should — but you could have a discussion on its own using economics and philosophy. If you look carefully at how the field has emerged, there has been a lot of fruitful discussion between economists and philosophers, partly because economics has made some very big assumptions in trying to model rational behavior, and philosophers naturally want to question and to probe and pick at those ideas. Philosophy also has had very fruitful discussions with economics,

because philosophy is pushed in the direction of asking questions about why do you think these idealized assumptions would work? Why should we assume that humans will behave in this way?

That's not to say that political theory or political science is not in conversation in philosophy. Again, that is another big area where philosophy and political theory have lots in conversation, right? So, in a way, we might think of philosophy as the (kind of) anchoring discipline, but I would say that we usually see two disciplines in conversation with each other that gives rise to a whole series of questions. So in terms of political science and philosophy, a big series of questions are raised about the legitimacy of the state. Why should citizens obey the state? Is it rational? Why should they do that? What kinds of obligations they have to one another, what kinds of obligations nation-states have to one another? That's another area where the two disciplines intersect very nicely.

You can have those conversations with an economic lens. But again, you (also) can have that conversation with just political theory and philosophy. The way I think about is that there are areas where putting those two disciplines in conversation will give you a lot and then a third discipline will be brought in to complicate the story. But in the beginning, we always often start with emphasis of one and usually two of those in conversation with one another.

Shang Wen: That's a very interesting way to see

it. Maybe just one last question on PPE-related matters — and I think you briefly said just now — if you could make a brand new PPE course now, how would the course look like and what would it be about?

Joel Chow: So I have been thinking about a new class, bringing in some of the tools from PPE to examine what are not traditionally PPE questions. One of the areas that I've been very interested in — the question, of course, starts from philosophy — is how do people learn about things from the world. Then, the thought is how do people learn about the world from one another? They talk to one another, they learn about what's happening around them. That means that knowledge is a kind of social phenomena, influenced by social networks and things like that. If that's true, that means that naturally, we see one point of contact with the social sciences, which is that we need economics and political science to help us to try to understand how people learn about the world.

In the past few years, we've increasingly seen why this is very important. The proliferation of misinformation often employs social motivations rather than acting on people's willingness to seek the truth. This class wants to explore that question a bit more and look at how economic analysis of communities of agents learning from one another operate. (We also) look at how political scientists have taken some of those models to think about how democracies should work, and how political

institutions should deal with questions about misinformation and disinformation. So, that's one of the classes I'm interested in thinking about.

Shang Wen: *Maybe now we'll move on to some questions related to yourself. What are some of the hobbies or activities you like to pursue in your free time?*

Joel Chow: This comes from some of the PPE stuff that I've been thinking about a lot. One of the things I'm very interested in – following my thinking about the collective, cumulative effects of people's choices – is this idea that we should reduce our carbon load. For the past few years, I've tried very hard to be conscious in some areas – not all, I should be more conscious, according to my own standards – about my carbon emissions. I've tried a lot to reduce my own carbon footprint, at least mainly with respect to transport. So it has led to an obsession with cycling everywhere. Naturally, it has led to a hobby, especially when you want to travel great distances. Other than that, because I like to do cycling, naturally I've met some friends who would like to do bouldering, climbing and gym. That's a new thing I've been doing a lot of. One thing I've been interested in is learning how to do more video work and that's also because I want to create smaller snippets of videos for students. So that's what I do outside of work.

Shang Wen: *Okay, so the next question is: What is one piece of life advice or wisdom you*

would give to an undergraduate today?

Joel Chow: One thing that I think students should bear in mind is that – and this is very cliché, but I will hopefully try to make it less cliché – grades are not the most important thing. What I mean by that is actually two things.

First, it's of course important to try to do well, but what will make you successful – however you define success, which can be defined in a multitude of ways – is your ability to engage with one another and to know yourself quite meaningfully. I think that is very important because this is probably the best time in your life to figure that out for yourself. That is also something that students, when I speak to them outside of class, are most interested in finding out. I have many students who might not talk to me that much during class but after the semester has ended, they will suddenly find me and say, “I need to figure out some stuff in my life,” and then they will talk to me for hours. (That) is fine, but I think that means that students are very keen and know that they need to figure things out. So you should try to devote quite a bit of time to doing that.

One way that you can do that is through reflecting upon your learning. That means thinking about: Why am I doing this? What do I find myself intrigued by? And learning from your peers and talking to one another. It takes a kind of introspection that I think is good to cultivate during university and hopefully, that

the university education also helps to cultivate. But it also takes a lot of time and energy, which is, if I'm honest, is getting a bit more scarce (in university). So, that's the other thing to be mindful of. Don't give yourself too much commitment (such) that you don't have the time and space to engage in that kind of reflection. Take the time to find that space, because when you graduate, your commitments will begin to become even more time-consuming, so that will become rarer.

Shang Wen: I see. So, I guess the next question is kind of related to what you said about talking to students and knowing yourself. How would you describe yourself as a lecturer or a teacher?

Joel Chow: This is probably the hardest question to answer. I think that I have one strength, which is that I am very passionate about what I want to teach. That is also a weakness, because I want to make sure that everyone understands certain things and then that can lead me down to covering too much. At the same time, that's a strength, because I really want to try to understand something and convey it to everyone.

But the other thing that I really want to do is to make sure that there's a classroom environment where you feel that you can at least see the applicability of abstract ideas. That is the thing that I always want to try to impress upon students. The things that we learn in PPE especially, can often seem very abstract and lofty, but they do have a lot of real world

relevance. I'll try my best to always show that in a variety of areas.

The last thing is that I want my students to come away from my lessons with the understanding that the social world is very complex. It's not something that we can understand easily, so we need to approach it with humility, but at the same time, it's not something that is impossible to appreciate. We can have some understanding of the world, but we should also be aware that our understanding would be limited in some very important ways. If nothing else, I think that is the most important takeaway, which is that social science and philosophy help us to appreciate the complexity of the world around us, but we also know that whatever answers we come up with are provisional at best.

Shang Wen: Finally, the last thing we wanted to ask is about the PPE Club. Could you share more about your plans for the PPE Club? For example, I believe you have a podcast and some YouTube video projects planned.

Joel Chow: So we are trying to work with the club to create some content. Some of it will be used for (the) introduction class, while some of it will also be used to do more popular explanations of things that are interesting in PPE.

For the podcast, we are still trying to see whether it can be done, but what I want to do is to get some faculty members who are all from

different areas in the three disciplines to talk about an issue. So that students actually get to see how people from different disciplines think about and understand an area and then how they have a discussion around that. That is very important for me, because that's how I envision interdisciplinary learning to occur. Students should not just learn about themselves, but different students will naturally have different strengths and talents. And that's fine, right? Not every student will always be equally competent in each area.

Then that's why we learn from one another. Because someone who might be more versatile in say, economic theory or understanding economic models, can explain something to another student who might be more interested in normative questions. Of course, everyone should be conversant in all three areas. But having different strengths means that students can tap on one another to understand something in a more holistic way. For the podcast, I hope to model some of that.

And the last thing that I want to do is to try to take something that's happening in the world and then use PPE tools to try to explain what's happening. But that's a bigger project that I'm working with the students and also doing myself.

An Interview with Mr Chan Kok Hoe



*Published December 2023
conducted by Wong Yee Fay*

On 7th November 2023, we sat down to have a chat with Mr Chan Kok Hoe, a Lecturer in the Department of Economics, as part of a series of interviews with faculty members.

Note: This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Yee Fay: Hi Prof, thanks for taking the time to join us in our series of faculty interviews. To start off, what made you interested in pursuing economics?

Chan Kok Hoe: So I started out in the science stream when I was a student? When it came to choosing what to do for O-Levels, I decided that I didn't want to do Biology [and Science], and so I did more Humanities. When I went to Junior College, it was also the same. At that time, I thought that I was quite interested in the human dimension, but I'm also pretty strong in terms of the hard sciences and mathematics. So what kind of subject would that work? And I thought, "Hey, maybe I can try Economics." And I got a lot of encouragement from my teachers in Junior College so I thought, "Hey, maybe I can make a career out of it."

My original intention was actually to be a military engineer, but I got detoured by the junior college experience and I decided to do Economics. When I came to NUS, that was the plan initially. It was actually very cute because I

had an interview experience looking for a job at DBS. You know, just to make sure that you cover your bases, right? I was talking with the two interviewers and we were getting along relatively fine, I was answering questions here and there, and at the end of the interview, they told me: "You know, I think you should go into academia." (laughs). So that was that, and the rest was history. So I went on to get a graduate degree, and then I came back to NUS and it's been one career ever since.

Yee Fay: Was there any prominent figure who inspired your interest in Economics?

Chan Kok Hoe: For starters, I wouldn't say so, it's really the subject itself. If you're looking for personal heroes in terms of economists, one of the earliest people is probably John Maynard Keynes. He was willing and able to use his understanding of economics to actually change how people saw things and also change how people did policy. That left a deep impression on me.

But Akerlof was saying, “People are not really rational. So what if we just make the assumption that a small percentage of people are not rational? Let's see how robust all the results that macroeconomics has come up with.” It turns out that the results are very not robust at all, they break down, right? So to me, that's the kind of intellectual humility and investigation that people need to have. Otherwise, they will be blinded by their own models. So basically, he was a role model for me to follow.

Yee Fay: I understand that some of your research areas include economic development and the economics of institutions. Could you share more regarding these research areas, as well as what inspired your interest in these research areas?

Chan Kok Hoe: I think [the research areas on the NUS website] are a bit outdated and I just haven't changed it. So, when I was in graduate school, I was learning to become a development economist. I was looking at issues regarding the importance of social capital in economic outcomes, and how do you measure social capital and things like that.

That kind of project didn't quite work out. So I put that aside for the economics of institutions instead. I was studying a lot of work by Oliver Williamson, who pioneered transaction cost economics, and I think he won a Nobel Prize as well for his theory.

So I thought that there would be a useful area to focus on. But since then my teaching career has taken precedence, right? Based on the kind of classes that I was doing, that's where my research interests actually germinated from. And so today, my interests are more focused on things like the Singapore economy and public economics. And because of my work teaching economics on the macro side, macro has become more important to me as well. This is how I ended up doing [the topic of] money.

Yee Fay: What was most difficult to grasp or understand in your study of Economics?

Chan Kok Hoe: That's a hard question. For the most part, economic concepts are actually not hard. The hard part is just being very careful with the math and working out the implications of the models. But once you do that, and you are able to think ten levels above it to see the big picture, then economics is not really that hard to do. I mean, the stuff that economists do is child's play compared to what the engineers are doing. So yeah, what's really, really hard? I'll probably say that it's not that the lessons are hard, but it's that the lessons don't stick.

The lessons don't stick because it's often economically advantageous for people not to do the right thing. In the stuff that I was doing with the financial crisis for HSS1000, that's really the moral of the story. Everybody knows from looking at 800 years of history that the financial crisis happened for so-and-so

reasons: expansion of credit, reduction in regulatory controls, and things like that.

But these things just keep happening over and over again nonetheless. So it's not that people don't know these things, right? It's that people in the system found it more advantageous to let them happen, and then [let] the other people pick out the pieces when things blow up. So I think that is probably the main issue. It is not about understanding economic concepts, it's about following through even if your personal interests go against it. If you give me another 20 minutes, I might think of a better answer to this question, but right now I can't think of anything that is really, really hard.

Yee Fay: What do you think is the importance of Economics in PPE?

Chan Kok Hoe: I can't say too much about the philosophy aspect, but when it comes to politics and economics, I think it is true that when push comes to shove, politics will trump economics. I think we see that right now in the current geopolitical situation, where the Americans are decoupling from the Chinese, not because it's the economically advantageous thing to do, but because they think it's what will make them secure and push the Chinese down. So we can see that politics trumps economics but, at the same time, the economic environment will shape what's actually politically possible, and economic pressures can have a big impact.

We're seeing some of these things happening with Germany right now. Germany made the political decision that [it] would break off economic ties with Russia because of the Russian-Ukraine war, and consequently, Russia cut off Germany's supply of oil and gas. What has happened to Germany in these two years is that its industries are crumbling. So many of its industries rely on cheap energy, and because they don't get it anymore now, they can't even function and they are moving out. So Germany has actually deindustrialised and this will have huge, tremendous implications for the way the German economy runs and German polity, as well. So economics always finds a way to feed back into politics. So, I think at some point, it's not advisable for an economist to know nothing about politics and it's certainly not wise for somebody who's focused on politics to know nothing about economics, you have to have both.

Now philosophy is the underlying bedrock for both of these disciplines and we need to see that. Keynes had a famous saying, I don't know the exact quote, but he talked about how, behind the mumblings of politicians is the idea of an economist, some defunct economist. So the development of the ideas does inform what politicians decide to do and does inform what policy decides to do, even if the idea itself is a distillation and the reality is actually much more complicated. So, for example, take the idea in my class that central banks ought to be independent from governments. It started out as some kind of experiment, but it germinated

into a full-fledged academic movement. Then from an academic movement, it kind of turned itself into policy and over the past 20 odd years, central bank after central bank has become independent. Some of it is through the machinations of organisations like the IMF, which is the political dimension. But the idea behind it actually comes from academia.

Yee Fay: Do you have any advice for PPE students who wish to pursue Economics further?

Chan Kok Hoe: Do you mean that you specialise in economics? I don't really know how it works with you guys anymore, because I heard that the amount of stuff that you have to do for each of the specialisations actually expanded, right?

Yee Fay: Not really. It's just that the specialisations were removed entirely.

Chan Kok Hoe: Oh, okay. So there's no specialisation.

Yee Fay: Yeah, so we were wondering, maybe for [PPE] students who want to do a second major or minor [in economics].

Chan Kok Hoe: Oh, I see. Well, Economics, as it is taught at NUS, tends to be a bit model-based, tends to be a bit mathematical and increasingly, there's a lot of empirical work in the form of econometrics, in the form of causal inference. So you've got to brush up on some of

your mathematical skills in order to handle the modules.

Beyond that, I think you should listen to your heart about what kind of things are interesting to you. In economics, there are a lot of field courses that cover different dimensions like competition policy, labour, public and so on and so forth. So hey, whatever is interesting to you, go there. The tools are pretty much the same across the board. That's why we make you guys do a ton of core modules and that gives you problems with mapping when you go to SEP, okay? (laughs) We apply the same tools to understand the different phenomena, so you need that foundation in the core modules, and then bring it to whatever that's interesting to you.

Yee Fay: If you could create a new PPE course, what would it be?

Chan Kok Hoe: You guys are not asking easy questions! (laughs) If I were to create a new PPE course, right... There might be something to what's going on when it comes to the pushing of social attitudes, the so-called "work dimension". How it interacts with the way companies are designed to run themselves, how the boards of directors are chosen, and what kind of policies companies are pushing and connecting that. I don't want to go full conspiracy theory here, but connecting that to the kind of organising institutions such as the World Economic Forum.

Well, the World Economic Forum is a very interesting institution. If you look at some of the leaders that are running many of the countries today, they have some kind of connection with the World Economic Forum when they were young. The foreign minister of Germany [Annalena Baerbock], Justin Trudeau from Canada, and Jacinda Ardern from New Zealand. They all have some connections and they are all pushing very similar kinds of agendas when it comes to social policy – sometimes economic policy as well, but mostly social policy. So, tracing how these things are connected to one another, tracing all these elements, could be the beginning of our class.

So if nobody is creating this kind of class, I don't know if I would do it. Hey, one of you guys can do it yourselves, and create your own module, right? There you go. (Laughs)

Yee Fay: *If not for teaching Economics, what else did you see yourself doing?*

Chan Kok Hoe: When I was in Junior College and I was deciding on a career, I figured very early that I wasn't really a good fit for business and for organisations like that, because they are very profit-focused. They're not trying to do something that is useful for the whole society.

So when I got to decision time, I really only wanted two choices. Either I was going to go into the government, or I was going into academia. In both areas, I thought that I was doing some wider good. Academia probably

won out because of [my] personality, and also because I applied for certain positions in the government service and I didn't get them. But personality-wise, I'm probably more suited for academia. Having said that, I have to change my personality as well because you know, I need to interact with students.

So yeah, the other answer would be public service. It's important that we don't just think about ourselves. Economics may teach you what happens when people think for themselves, and that's no problem, [because] people think for themselves a lot of times. But I think the whole economy and the whole society do not work well if we were thinking about ourselves all the time – we can't do that.

Yee Fay: *What does your typical day as a lecturer look like?*

Chan Kok Hoe: I would spend some parts of the day looking through the new trends that are going up. I'm looking at certain economic blogs and economic articles, trying to find things that connect to the courses that I'm teaching and the kind of work that I'm interested in. The other part is dealing with the course administration and things like that, such as emails from students who miss their classes.

A small bit is things that we do as part of our service in the university – things to do with the student society and things to do with the alumni society. And sometimes outreach,

because the Ministry of Education has this and that, such as this grant proposal available to you, things like that.

So that's most of the day. Then, [we have] a small little part of the day where we can focus on "Okay, how [can I] make my class a little bit better? How can I restructure this particular tutorial now that this new event has come up and it's interesting to students and stuff like that?"

Yee Fay: Sounds interesting, maybe it's time for me to consider a career in academia.

Chan Kok Hoe: The only bad thing about academia is that the demographics are against us. Classes are getting smaller. So I don't know whether the positions will be there. They need people like myself to be out, then people can come in.

Yee Fay: What are some of your interests/hobbies outside of work?

Chan Kok Hoe: Because, as you know, of my personality, I'm not really a very sociable person. So, I don't partake in a lot of these kind of social activities and all that. But I do a little bit of hiking. Some of it is to prepare for certain trips to certain places just to see mountains.

So, recently during the vacation break, I was in Tanzania, so I went to visit Kilimanjaro. That's seven days to the summit and one day back, so an eight-day trip. You can see a lot of things

here and there. To do that safely, you would probably need to train a bit, so I do quite a bit of hiking and running here and there. But being the introverted, insular person that I am, even during the weekends I spend quite a lot of time actually looking at [school] material, seeing what's going to work and what's not going to work. So [I think I'm] a little bit more work-obsessed than healthy.

Yee Fay: Are there any academic-related projects or modules that you are considering initiating in future?

Chan Kok Hoe: I've been doing a lot of new things over the past few years. So over the next year, I do not expect to make any innovations. What I do want is to revamp some of the modules that I'm doing right now and make them all together better.

This is a tough process because it involves tearing down the things that you have built up over the years, things that you're familiar with. So like public economics and public finance, I think it needs an overhaul. It's not a new module, but it will be a kind of regeneration of the module, to refresh it and make it more relevant.

Same with EC1101E. And with PE modules, it's a never-ending process, because things just happen all the time. New things are coming up and so it's always being renewed. So, a brand new module project is not for the next year, I don't think I would do that.